

Striptease

by Alobear

Category: Person of Interest

Genre: Friendship, Hurt-Comfort

Language: English

Characters: Detective Carter, H. Finch, J. Reese, Lionel F.

Status: Completed

Published: 2016-04-11 10:45:28

Updated: 2016-04-11 10:45:28

Packaged: 2016-04-27 19:57:35

Rating: T

Chapters: 1

Words: 6,134

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: A Number is never as straight-forward as it seems, and this one is no different. Finch has to take a more active role than usual, after Reese is incapacitated.

Striptease

Striptease

by

Alobear

Category: Gen

Notes: Set sometime after S01E19 Flesh and Blood, back when things were simple!

XXXXX

"So, tell me about the Number." Reese was strolling down a street, just as the sun was going down.

Finch's crisp voice came through his earpiece. "Her name is Jelena Karleusa. She's originally from Serbia, currently working at a strip club called Angels, which is two blocks south of your current position. Her shift started twenty minutes ago, so you should have plenty of access."

Reese smiled slightly at Finch's tone. "Jealous, Harold?" he teased.

"Hardly," came the clipped reply.

"Sure beats the usual gig of hanging out on a cold rooftop with a

camera," Reese said. "Do you have any leads on what kind of trouble she might be in?"

"Not as yet. Though, given her profession and the area you're in, the possibilities are endless."

"Careful, Finch," Reese said. "Your snobbery is showing."

"It's not snobbery," Finch protested. "I'm relaying facts. There were approximately nine crime complaints per day in the Sixth Precinct year-to-date as of May last year, according to NYPD crime data."

"Okay, point taken," Reese said. "I'll be careful. By the way, how am I going to get close to Jelena's phone? She's hardly going to bring it out on stage with her."

"Just leave that to me, Mr Reese. Once you're inside, log into the customer wi-fi and I'll do the rest."

Fair enough," Reese said. "I'm at the club now."

He pulled open the discrete door and stepped inside. Like many establishments of this kind, the Angels club was quite dark. A short corridor led to a podium where a scantily-clad young woman, backed up by a large bouncer, collected the entry fee, and then Reese was free to access the club proper. A long bar stretched all the way down one wall, and small tables with stools filled the space between that and the central stage. This was a raised, round area in the middle of the room, with a runway that led to a curtained-off section in the back wall. There was a smattering of patrons at the tables, and a girl working the pole on the stage, but the atmosphere was less than enticing.

"Our Number performs under the wildly inventive name of Crystal," Finch informed Reese.

Reese glanced at the picture on his phone and compared it with the girl on stage.

"Well, she's not performing right now," he said softly.

He glanced round the club again and spotted a row of booths along the far wall, some of which had curtains pulled across them to block them from view of the main room. As Reese watched, one of these was drawn back and a girl matching the one in the photo emerged, followed shortly afterwards by a flushed-looking man.

"Got her," Reese reported. "She was giving someone a bit of personal attention."

"A private lap-dance would be a good opportunity for someone to do Jelena harm," Finch pointed out.

Reese shook his head slightly. "Only if they don't mind getting caught. The girls are monitored pretty closely in here, and it would be almost impossible for an attacker to get out past security once he was made."

Keeping one eye on his target, Reese made his way over to the bar and

ordered a drink, so as not to arouse suspicion. Once he had handed over the money - and been forcibly reminded that places like this made their profits from an exorbitant mark-up on drinks - he turned and leaned casually on the bar, surveying the room while focusing most of his attention on Jelena. Remembering what Finch had said, he took his phone out again and logged onto the free wi-fi.

A few moments later, Finch said, "I'm connected to Jelena's phone. Nothing useful that I can immediately spot. We'll just have to keep an eye on her for the moment and see what happens."

"Will do, Finch," Reese replied, sipping his drink.

A few minutes later, Reese sensed a problem over by the private booths. He drifted closer to see what was going on. It appeared that one of Jelena's colleagues had taken a customer into a booth for a private dance, and was now complaining to one of the security guards about something. The customer was lurking nearby, looking sullen. As Reese watched, the bouncer took two steps closer to the customer, looming over him in a threatening manner. The customer wasn't cowed, instead squaring up to the bouncer and saying something that didn't look very friendly. The bouncer reacted by throwing a punch, and then muscling the customer out of the main area towards the street door. The brief moment of drama over, Reese turned his attention back to watching Jelena, only to discover she was no longer in the room. He sighed in frustration.

"Everything all right, Mr Reese?" Finch's concerned voice was immediately in his ear.

"Just a slight disagreement between a patron and management," Reese told him. "But I've lost Jelena."

There was a brief moment of silence, then Finch was back. "It seems she slipped out of the club while you weren't looking, Mr Reese. She's moving away from you, heading towards the docks."

"I thought you said her shift only just started," Reese said, discarding his half-empty drink on the bar and heading for the door.

"It did," Finch said, "but evidently she feels she has more important things to do. She didn't receive any kind of message on her phone to prompt this departure, but it certainly seems unorthodox."

"Well, as long as you can keep tracking her, it won't take me long to catch up," Reese said, now back out on the street. "And perhaps whatever she's doing will give us a clue as to why the Machine is interested in her."

"We have no idea what you may be walking into," Finch pointed out, "so just be careful."

"Always," said Reese.

XXXXX

Finch was tense, his fingers hovering over the keyboard, waiting for there to be something useful for him to do. This was always the part of the job he hated most; when Reese was walking into a potentially

dangerous situation and Finch was powerless to help him if things went wrong. He often allowed his nervousness to get the better of him and peppered Reese with inane questions in an attempt to feel more in control. Today was no different.

"Have you reached the location yet, Mr Reese?" he asked.

"Just arriving at the gate now, Finch," Reese replied softly. He rarely sounded impatient when responding to Finch's requests for updates. Finch figured Reese probably realised the reason behind them and was humouring him. There was a pause, then Reese continued.

"One guard, unconscious," he reported, keeping the message to the minimum.

"Be careful," Finch said. "We have no idea what to expect in there."

"I'm always careful," came the sardonic reply.

Finch could hear Reese's footsteps over the comm, as he made his way further into the cargo area. In his mind's eye, he saw Reese moving between the ranks of towering cargo containers, with potential ambushes at every step.

"I have eyes on Jelena," Reese said. "Looks like she's waiting for someone. She's right out in the open."

The footsteps sped up, in time with Finch's own heartbeat, and he found himself holding his breath. Suddenly, there was a crunch, what sounded like a grunt of pain, and then dead silence.

"Mr Reese?" Finch said in alarm. Nothing. "John? What happened?"

The message "SIGNAL LOST" flashed up on the monitor screen and Finch lurched to his feet. "Come on, Bear," he called. "John needs us."

Less than two minutes later, Finch was in his car, racing towards Reese's last known location. An expert at multi-tasking, he drove, tracked Jelena Karleusa's cell phone, and called Detective Carter all at the same time.

"Carter." The Detective's calm voice prompted an instant surge of relief.

"Our mutual friend is in trouble," Finch told her baldly. "Can you meet me right now?" He gave her the address.

"I'll be right there," she said, and ended the call.

In the meantime, it looked from the cell-tracking as though Jelena was heading back to the strip club and, even with John out of contact and possibly injured, Finch knew he couldn't abandon her to her fate. His next call was to Detective Fusco. As with Carter, he wasted no time on pleasantries.

"There's a stripper by the name of Jelena Karleusa," he said. "We think she's in danger and there's nobody protecting her right now. I need you to go to the Angels club in the West Village and pick her

up. "

"Where's Wonder Boy?" Fusco wanted to know.

"Let me worry about Mr Reese," Finch said, his voice tight. "Just find the girl and take her to one of our safe-houses." He gave Fusco an address.

"What if she doesn't want to go?" Fusco would never just follow instructions; he always had to ask endless questions.

"Arrest her if necessary," Finch instructed. "Just get her to safety. I'll hopefully meet you there shortly." He cut the connection, not wanting to be drawn into further discussion.

Soon afterwards, he pulled up outside the cargo dock. He leapt out of the car, grabbed Bear's leash and strode inside, completely ignoring the unconscious figure of the guard at the gate. Bear strained against his leash, whining softly. Finch hurried between the cargo containers, his heart pounding painfully and his lower back throbbing in time with it.

"Mr Reese?" he called hopefully. "Are you there?"

As if in answer, a familiar silhouette came into view, stepping around the edge of one of the containers, one hand resting on the metal wall. Finch exhaled audibly with relief, then caught his breath again, as the figure staggered one step forwards and then dropped to its knees.

"John!" he cried, dropping Bear's leash and rushing to Reese's side. He threw himself to the ground just in time to catch Reese as he toppled over completely, Bear circling them anxiously.

Reese's eyes were barely open, and his breathing was ragged. There was blood everywhere, mostly emanating from an ugly gash on the side of his head. Finch fumbled for his handkerchief and pressed it to the wound, watching in dismay as it was almost instantly saturated. Worse still, Reese didn't react to the contact, instead just lying limply in Finch's arms.

Finch heard running footsteps and looked up to see Detective Carter approaching rapidly.

"Oh, thank god," he breathed. "Help me with him."

Together, they lifted Reese to his feet, putting one arm over each of their shoulders. Reese was just aware enough to make a semblance of walking and they made slow progress to Finch's car. Once they had manoeuvred Reese into the back seat, Bear jumping in alongside him, Finch looked up at Carter, ignoring the pain in his back from his earlier physical exertion.

"Can we take him to your place?" he asked.

Carter looked less than happy. "Don't you think he needs a hospital?" she said with evident disapproval.

Finch huffed with irritation. "You know we can't take him to a hospital," he retorted. "We need somewhere safe to assess his

injuries before we decide if he needs more professional medical help."

Carter sighed heavily. "Okay, my place," she agreed. "I've called in a disturbance to the precinct, so help's on the way for the guard." With that, she went quickly back to her own car.

Finch followed her through the dark streets, stealing frequent glances at his passenger in the rear-view mirror. Reese moaned softly on a couple of the sharper corners, but didn't move or speak. When they arrived at Carter's apartment building, they repeated their earlier manhandling of Reese and managed to get him safely inside without anyone seeing them, and finally onto the bed in Taylor's room.

Finch hovered anxiously while Carter examined Reese as best she could, and cleaned and dressed the obvious wound on his head.

"I think that's the only injury," she said when she was done. "As far as I can tell."

"Well, he's probably got a concussion," Finch decided, "and there isn't really anything a hospital can do for that, which we can't do ourselves here. But I need to go. Our current Number is still in danger." He thought quickly, trying to decide on the best course of action. "I've enlisted Detective Fusco's assistance in getting her to a safe-house. I'll join him there and see what I can find out from Ms Karleusa."

He reached out a hand until it hovered just above Reese's shoulder, paused for a long moment, then pulled it back again without actually touching him. Then he turned back to Carter.

"He'll probably want to sleep a lot, which is fine," he told her, inwardly cursing his own weakness as he heard his voice tremble ever so slightly, "but you should wake him up every couple of hours, and make sure he drinks plenty of water. Dehydration can severely increase the headache pain. He can take painkillers, but nothing stronger."

"It's okay, Finch," Carter replied. "I know what to do. Now, go. And don't worry; he's in good hands here."

"I know that, Detective," Finch said, momentarily affronted. Then he realised how he must sound. "And thank you."

He threw one last glance in the direction of Reese, then turned stiffly and limped from the room.

XXXXX

Carter watched Finch go, wondering how long it would be before he called her for an update on Reese's condition. Turning her attention to her temporary houseguest, she regarded the unconscious form of the ex-military assassin with interest. His handsome features were marred by the ugly wound on the side of his head, now held together with a line of butterfly bandages. Otherwise, he was more relaxed than she thought she had ever seen him. Awake, he was always hyper-vigilant, aware of everything around him, assessing every potential threat and constantly primed for action. Carter wondered if it was ever possible

for him to switch his training off, or if it permeated every aspect of his life. She suspected the latter.

Mindful of Finch's instructions, she went to the kitchen and filled a jug with water, carrying it back through to the spare bedroom with a tumbler and a packet of pills. As she put them down on the bedside table, she noticed Reese's eyelids fluttering.

"That's it, John," she said softly. "Time to wake up. Come on all the way back for me."

The blue eyes slowly opened, but his gaze was unfocused.

Carter wasn't remotely surprised when the first word out of his mouth was, "Finch?"

"No, it's Carter," she told him. "You're safe, though a little the worse for wear."

"Where's Finch?" Reese's voice was low and strained, but insistent.

"He's out, keeping an eye on your current case," Carter said, then immediately regretted it when Reese's eyes widened and he started struggling to sit up. "Hey, no!" she admonished, laying a hand on his shoulder. "He left you here for a reason, you know? You're in no fit state to go after him."

Reese shook her off, swinging his legs laboriously over the side of the bed. "I have to," he growled. "He's not safe out there alone."

Carter decided to try another approach. "Okay, fine," she said, raising her hands in surrender. "Go for it. If you can make it out that door under your own power, I won't say another word."

She watched as Reese gritted his teeth and heaved himself to his feet, using the nightstand for support. His face was grey, but determined, and, for a moment, Carter wondered if she'd miscalculated and he might actually make it through pure stubbornness. Then, he put out one foot to take a step towards the door, and crumpled to the floor in an ungainly heap. She made no attempt to break his fall, thinking it was a lesson he needed to learn. Instead, she looked down at him sternly.

"Now will you get back in bed and do as you're told?" she asked. "And if you puke on my carpet, I won't be best pleased."

Reese said nothing, just floundered feebly on the floor until she took pity on him and helped him back into the bed. He sank back against the pillows, his eyes shut tight and his whole body rigid with pain. Carter took two painkillers out of the packet, filled the glass with water and held out both to him.

"Here," she said. "Take these, and drink all the water. Finch said it would help with the pain."

Reese opened his eyes and took the pills from her, swallowing them carefully and draining the glass of water in a few short gulps.

"Thanks," he said, his voice shaky. "But why aren't you out helping Finch?"

Carter folded her arms and glared at him. "Because he told me to stay here and look after you. Quit worrying. Fusco's with him."

Reese reached up and gingerly fingered the gash on his head, then regarded Carter with scepticism. "You think Fusco's up to dealing with this?" he asked.

"Fusco can handle himself," Carter said, though she wondered how much she actually believed that. "You shouldn't underestimate him," she continued, trying to convince herself as much as Reese. "Besides, they weren't planning on going after whatever guys flattened you. They're just going to pick up the target and take her to a safe house, to keep her out of harm's way. Now, you should go back to sleep."

Reese's mouth twisted in frustration, as if he was trying to remember something that was just out of reach. Carter could see how angry he was at his own condition.

"The best thing you can do for Finch right now is rest up and get better," Carter told him. "I'll wake you again in a couple of hours with an update, I promise."

Reese looked at her for a long moment, then sighed with resignation and nodded wearily. He turned slightly onto his side and closed his eyes. Carter regarded him affectionately, listening as his breathing evened out, and then left the room, closing the door gently behind her.

XXXXX

Finch was pacing. It hurt, but the physical pain provided some small distraction from the mental anguish he was currently suffering. The silence where Reese's voice would normally be in his ear was deafening, and he had to clench his hands into fists to stop himself from reaching for the phone to call Carter.

It was all his fault. If he had obtained more information, Reese would never have been hurt. If he was capable of providing effective physical back-up, Reese wouldn't have to go into risky situations alone. If he hadn't bailed Reese out at the subway station and persuaded him to join his crusade, Reese would never have been in danger in the first place. As he realised his thought processes were spiralling out of control, Finch stopped pacing and forced himself to be rational. Given what had happened in that subway car, it was obvious that Reese would have found more trouble on his own, even without the Machine and the numbers. In fact, thinking back to Reese's condition and attitude at the time, it was likely the outcome of the next violent incident might not have gone in Reese's favour. As Finch had pointed out to him, he had needed a job and, more importantly, a purpose, and Finch had provided both. Reese had already thanked him for that on more than one occasion, and Finch knew Reese wouldn't blame him for the current situation.

It didn't stop Finch feeling guilty and anxious, though, and he thought that probably wouldn't change until Reese's voice was back in

his ear again.

Right now, he was waiting at the safe house for Detective Fusco to arrive with the current Number, while where he really wanted to be was back at Detective Carter's apartment, making sure Reese was resting and drinking enough water. The Machine never stopped, though, and certainly didn't take into account assets being temporarily taken out of commission. So, the case had to continue, if Finch was to ensure no harm would come to Jelena Karleusa.

Finch's musings were interrupted by the sound of a car pulling up outside the building. Bear looked up from where he had been curled next to the fireplace, instantly alert. A few moments later, Detective Fusco came in, with Jelena in tow. Bear rose to his feet and growled, but stilled at a word from Finch. Fusco closed the door behind him and threw a long-suffering look in Finch's direction.

"Any trouble, Detective?" Finch asked.

"Not really," Fusco replied, "though she wasn't that keen to come with me."

"What the hell is going on?" Jelena demanded.

"We have reason to believe you are in danger, Ms Karleusa," Finch said more calmly than he felt.

"And you are?" Jelena's tone was aggressive and she certainly didn't look fragile.

"Someone who would like to help you," Finch obfuscated. "If you will let me."

She looked extremely sceptical. "You send a policeman to abduct me, and you expect me to believe you want to help? Help with what? The only person who is causing trouble in my life is you."

Finch could see her point of view. This was always the hardest part, getting the Number to let them interfere without being able to explain where they got their information.

"Ms Karleusa," he said, "a colleague of mine was attacked and injured at the docks earlier this evening, whilst attempting to protect you. Can you really say you know of no potential danger you might be in? Why were you at the docks in the first place?"

Jelena narrowed her eyes and regarded him shrewdly. She took a few moments before she answered but, eventually, she said, "My brother - he owns the club. He asked me to meet him there. He didn't tell me why, but he has been buying guns recently and storing them at the club. I don't know what he is planning, but I don't like it."

Fusco snorted. "This guy has his sister working in his strip club? Sounds like a real gem."

"He may not be the best of men," Jelena said, "but he would not hurt me. Of that I am sure."

"That's as may be," Finch said, "but bad things can happen very

easily once you get mixed up in violent crimes. Trust me, I know from vast experience."

Jelena looked Finch up and down, a little contemptuously. "You? You are a criminal mastermind?"

Fusco let out a bark of laughter and Finch glared at him.

"Not precisely, no," Finch said, in clipped tones. "As I said, we would like to help you. Is there anywhere else you might go, until whatever your brother is planning is safely over?"

Jelena looked as though she was considering his words carefully. "Maybe," she said. "I need a few minutes to think about this. Is there a bathroom I can use?"

Finch told her where it was, and she disappeared inside and locked the door.

"So, if the brother is the one planning the crime," Fusco asked, "how come your fancy Machine gave you her number instead of his?"

"That, Detective, is a very good question," Finch said, and was amused when Fusco looked inordinately pleased at his praise. "It's never clear why the Machine picks some numbers over others. We have ensured Ms Karleusa's safety, at least temporarily, so perhaps we should now see what we can find out about the brother, as our involvement with this Number will not be over until he has also been dealt with."

Finch turned to his laptop and started typing, Fusco crossing the room to stand behind him and look over his shoulder. It didn't take Finch long to find the right person.

"Jadranko Karleusa," he read aloud. "Two years Jelena's senior, and - currently serving ten years in prison for armed robbery."

XXXXXX

Reese came back to awareness slowly. His head felt fuzzy and he couldn't immediately remember where he was.

"Umâ€|"

A young male voice startled him, causing him to snap his eyes open and move his head sharply to the side. This, in turn, awakened a fierce pain in his right temple, making him hiss in a breath and wince.

"What are you doing in my bed?" the voice asked, and the blurry figure in the doorway resolved into Carter's son, Taylor.

Before Reese could formulate any kind of an answer, Carter appeared behind her son and laid her hands on his shoulders.

"Hey," she said, softly. "I didn't hear you get in. Sorry, John, I meant to intercept him before he came up here and disturbed you. Don't you remember Mr Reese, baby?"

Taylor grimaced at the endearment and shook off his mother's hands, though not aggressively.

"Sure I do," he said, "but what's he doing in my bed?"

Carter stepped past him into the room and came to stand at Reese's side. Reese struggled into a more upright position and blinked at them both, cursing the slowness of his brain. Carter spoke, taking the pressure off him again.

"John was helping someone, like he helped you that time, and he got hurt, so he's resting here for a while, until he feels better."

"Sorry to be taking up your room," Reese said. He started to shift towards the edge of the bed. "Maybe I should move to the couch."

Carter immediately reached out to press him back into the mattress.

"Oh, no you don't," she said sternly. "I believe we've already had that argument, and you lost quite spectacularly, as I recall. You are staying right where you are. Finch would have my hide if I let anything happen to you."

"Hey, it's fine," Taylor added. "I seriously owe you, and lending you my bed for the night doesn't even remotely even the score."

"Thanks," Reese said, much relieved at not having to move, even if he wouldn't ever admit it.

"Now," Carter said, "since you're awake, do you think you could fill me in on what happened down at the docks? What do you remember?"

Reese tried to concentrate. He had followed Jelena, he remembered that much. He started talking it through aloud, working out what had happened as he went along.

"I think the Number was meeting someone there, to take some sort of delivery," he said. "I heard her on the phone, discussing the arrangements. She was annoyed because whoever she was meeting was late. I was concentrating on listening in on the conversation, and I didn't spot someone coming up behind me. I think she hit me with brick."

"She?" Carter queried.

Reese winced again at the memory. "Yeah," he said, reluctantly. "I caught a glimpse of her after I went down. It was one of the other girls from the strip club."

Taylor burst out laughing from where he still stood in the doorway. "Seriously? You got taken out by a stripper? That's hilarious!"

"That's quite enough from you, young man," Carter admonished. "Go make yourself useful by taking out the trash."

Taylor stomped off, suddenly the epitome of the sulky teenager.

"Sorry about that," Carter said, once he was gone.

"It wasn't exactly my finest moment," Reese admitted, ruefully.

"So, you think the Number was making some kind of criminal deal?" Carter asked. "That makes her the perpetrator, not the victim, right?"

"I guess," Reese said, still struggling to think clearly. "We've made that mistake before. Wait, where's Finch?"

"He went to meet up with Fusco. They were going to collect up your Number and take her somewhere safe. No," she said sharply, as Reese made to try and get up again. "You know you can't do him any good in the state you're in. Let me call him."

XXXXX

Jelena was still in the bathroom when Finch's phone buzzed. He saw Detective Carter's number and everything else went out of his head. He snatched up the phone and answered it.

"Detective, how is Mr Reese?"

"Stubborn as hell, but still just about in one piece," Carter said, "but that's not why I'm calling. He managed to remember some of what happened at the docks, and it looks like your Number might be more than she appears. I don't think the Machine intended for you to protect her, Finch."

"Detective Fusco and I actually just reached the same conclusion," Finch replied. He turned to Fusco. "Will you go and bring our guest back out here, please?"

Fusco rolled his eyes, but went in the direction of the bathroom anyway.

Finch spoke back into the phone. "Will you hold on a moment, please, Detective Carter?"

She made a noise of assent, and Finch took the phone away from his ear to access the pairing application. It showed a text message Jelena had sent a few minutes before to the strip club, asking some of the security guards to come and collect her, and warning them to be ready to face opposition.

"Oh, dear," Finch said.

He heard Carter asking what was wrong, and put the phone back to his ear.

"It seems Ms Karleusa isn't keen to enjoy our hospitality, as we suspected. We may be facing a siege quite shortly."

"I'll be right there," Carter said, and hung up.

After the conversation with Carter, Finch turned round to see Fusco manhandling Jelena out of the bathroom.

"We really were trying to help you," he said, disappointed.

She gave him a sarcastic smile. "Too bad I didn't need your help. Your man actually screwed up a very lucrative deal at the docks. And now the two of you will pay for your meddling, as well."

"Don't underestimate us," Finch warned. "We've been doing this quite successfully for a long time. You could still end all this amicably by calling off your men."

Jelena rolled her eyes. "Men," she said. "Always so sure of themselves. You underestimated me, and look where that got you."

"Not underestimated," Finch countered. "We just wanted to think the best of you, that's all. Is that so terrible?"

The wait was tense. Finch wondered if it might have been better for them to leave the safe house and re-group elsewhere, but they had quite a good defensive position where they were, and Detective Carter would be able to provide assistance from outside once she arrived.

It wasn't long before there were sounds of someone trying to break in downstairs. Fusco had secured Jelena in one of the bedrooms and was positioned with good line of sight to the door. He had offered Finch his back-up weapon, but Finch declined. He didn't think now was the best time to start using a gun; he feared it would cause more problems than it would solve.

The noises downstairs intensified. It seemed that Jelena's employees were quite determined to reach her, despite whatever obstacles they might encounter. Finch admired their dedication, even while he worried about what might happen if they managed to gain access. He wished John were there; Detective Fusco was all well and good as part of the team on occasion, but Finch would much rather trust his safety to John, who would have been able to deal with any and all opposition single-handed and in record time.

In the end, it wasn't the armed thugs outside who posed the greatest danger. Just at the point when they apparently broke the door down, the bedroom door opened behind Finch and he felt rather than heard a presence at his back.

"Glasses! Look out!" Fusco called out, and launched himself in Finch's direction. In the process of knocking Finch out of the way, Fusco's elbow connected quite solidly with Finch's jaw, and Finch collapsed to the floor in a crumpled heap. From this position, he saw Bear leap at an apparently unsecured Jelena, knocking a paperweight from her grasp and then standing over her, snarling.

At the same time, the sound of gunfire reached them from the direction of the stairs and, a few moments later, Detective Carter swept into the room, gun at the ready, and expression grim.

She took in the scene and relaxed an iota, dropping her gun to her side.

Finch managed to lever himself to his feet, while Fusco rescued Jelena from Bear's supervision and marched her over to the sofa, motioning for her to sit down. She glowered at him, but complied.

"I've got two goons incapacitated downstairs," Carter reported. "Everything okay up here?"

"Yes, thank you, Detective," Finch said, with a hard look in Fusco's direction. "You have impeccable timing."

At least Fusco had the grace to look a little sheepish.

"Turns out your assumptions might not have been so far off after all," Carter said. "I heard from the precinct on the way over here. The unit that was despatched to the docks intercepted a gang of smugglers delivering a cargo of high-end designer lingerie knock-offs, which was presumably what your Number here was after. But, they also found a container full of women bound for enforced prostitution. So, she and her colleagues might have ended up victims rather than perpetrators if you and Reese hadn't intervened."

Finch wasn't surprised when Jelena failed to demonstrate appropriate gratitude.

Carter and Fusco sorted out taking all three of the bad guys to the station, leaving Finch to tidy up the safe house and then take himself off home. He supposed he should be relieved that the situation hadn't gone any further out of control, but he had to admit it wasn't exactly their finest hour.

XXXXX

The next morning, Finch heard the metal door sliding back and looked up in surprise to see Reese entering the main floor of the library. Bear gave an excited bark and bounded over to greet him, making Reese stagger slightly under the enthusiastic onslaught. Reese strode slowly but purposefully into the room, making a fuss of Bear with one hand as he came.

"Good morning, Mr Reese," Finch said in his usual neutral tone. "Should you be up and about so soon?"

Reese approached and stopped right next to Finch's chair, reaching out to ghost his fingers across the livid bruise darkening Finch's jaw.

"I could ask you the same, Finch," he said, simply, only his eyes betraying his weariness and continuing pain.

Finch allowed the attention for a couple of seconds, then smoothly shifted his chair backwards, breaking the contact. Reese sighed and crossed to the other chair, sitting down heavily and shielding his eyes with one hand.

"I'm sorry," Finch said softly. "I should have - "

"Don't do that." Reese cut him off, not sharply, but definitely. "You couldn't have known, just like I couldn't be there to back you up

when you needed it." He looked up. "But I'm sorry, too."

They held each other's gaze for a long moment, then Reese nodded towards Finch's monitor screen, suddenly casual again.

"What are you watching?" he asked.

Finch couldn't help the hint of a smile that stretched his lips. "Detective Fusco," he said. "He's just about to open the gift I sent him as a thank you for all his 'help'."

Reese scooted closer, obviously intrigued, until their shoulders were nearly touching. The screen showed a shot of Fusco's desk, almost from above. The detective was tearing open a small package, an expression of confusion on what they could see of his face. He lifted the lid off the box, rootled around in some tissue paper, and extracted a pair of lacy panties. He stared at them in astonishment for a second, then dropped them as if they were on fire, shoving the lid back on the box and glancing around in alarm to see if anyone had noticed. His shoulders slumped in defeat when he discovered Carter at his elbow.

"Something I should know, Fusco?" she teased, the microphone in her cell phone allowing Finch and Reese to hear the conversation.

"Aww, just shut up, okay?" Fusco grouched, throwing a murderous glare directly at the camera.

Finch looked round just in time to be graced with one of Reese's rare and blinding smiles.

"Nice work, Finch," Reese said. "Though I'd be careful around Christmas time, if I were you. Lionel's the type to hold a grudge."

Finch chuckled. "A fair point," he said. "I'll bear it in mind." He paused for a beat. "And, John?" Reese looked at him expectantly. "I'm glad you're all right."

Reese ducked his head, his smile lingering. "You too, Harold," he said. "You too."

THE END

End
file.